

BANG! The Bert Berns Story Needs To Be Seen

by Peter Stone Brown

When a filmmaker, especially an unknown filmmaker wants their film to be scene and picked up for distribution, they enter it into as many film festivals as they can in hopes that it will gain enough notice to be picked up for distribution. Currently making the rounds following its acclaimed debut last spring at South By Southwest is *BANG! The Bert Berns Story*. If the name Bert Berns doesn't register familiarity, the songs he wrote will because many of them were huge hits in the 1960s: A Little Bit Of Soap, Twist and Shout, Tell Him, Cry Baby, Everybody Needs Somebody To Love, Cry To Me, Hang On Sloopy, Here Comes The Night, Are You Lonely For Me and Piece Of My Heart. There's many, many more.

Bang! was made by Berns' son Brett, and co-directed by him and San Francisco based filmmaker Bob Sarles who has made several music documentaries including *Sweet Blues: A Film About Mike Bloomfield*, *Fly Jefferson Airplane*, *John Lee Hooker: Come And See About Me*, *Feed Your Head: The Psychedelic Era* and *Soulsville* as well as the short films at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, the EMP Museum in Seattle and the Stax Museum of American Soul Music in Memphis.

The film uses interviews with various musicians, songwriters, others involved in the music business in various ways and members of Berns' family to convey his story. Among those interviewed are Van Morrison, Ronald Isley, Keith Richards, Solomon Burke, Paul McCartney, Jerry Ragovoy, Wilson Pickett, Mike Stoller, Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich and San Francisco music critic Joel Selvin who wrote *Here Comes the Night: The Dark Soul of Bert Berns and the Dirty Business of Rhythm and Blues* as well as the narration for the film spoken by Steve Van Zandt, who as the film unfolds is ultimately the perfect voice to tell this story.

Through the various interviews, a very clear picture is provided of the New York music business in the first half of the '60s, both the creative side and the seamy side. The seamier side is represented by Carmine "Wassell" Denoia was a manager and a bookie, and when he needed to be, an enforcer, especially when it came to getting people paid or collecting royalties. His interview segments are among the most colorful in the movie. He is clearly someone who knew how to make offers that couldn't be refused.

The creative side is represented by the stories and also a couple of clips, both audio and film of Berns in the studio. While Berns heart was clearly in

songwriting, he turned out to be a formidable producer who knew how to get the best out of his artists. He also had the magic touch for creating hits. He knew what to add or what to change in a song to make it a hit almost instinctively.

Berns was born in the Bronx and suffered rheumatic fever as a youth, which permanently damaged his heart. He wasn't expected to live past 21. He studied piano and started writing songs without success. He became enthralled by the Mambo craze of the '50s and went to Cuba because of the music, and opened a nightclub, and apparently met Fidel Castro. He returned to the US right before Castro took over. The Latin influence on his music can be heard in many of his songs, one of the most obvious being the verse section of "Here Comes The Night."

Finally in 1961, one of his songs, "A Little Bit Of Soap" became a hit for the Jarmels, and another song "Twist And Shout" was recorded by the Top Notes and became an even bigger hit the following year by the Isley Brothers and a hit again the next year by The Beatles. Soon he was hired as a songwriter by Atlantic Records where he also became a staff producer, at first mentored by Jerry Wexler, perhaps the greatest record producer of all time. One of the best stories in the film is about recording "Cry To Me," a hit for Solomon Burke. Burke wanted to do something upbeat and Berns changed the song to accommodate him. Wexler disapproved, but Berns went ahead and recorded it anyway, resulting in a hit. Similar scenarios happened again and again.

Wexler was also a brilliant judge of talent, but could be a ruthless prick when it came to paying people causing various artists to leave the label along with songwriters such as Lieber and Stoller who were owed thousands of dollars.

Eventually Berns grew tired of Wexler interfering with his productions and it was decided he would have his own label, BANG Records. (The name was an anagram of the owners' first names, Bert, Ahmet Ertegun, Nesuhi Ertegun and Gerald Wexler.) Immediately the company had hits by the McCoys, a young songwriter, Neil Diamond and later with "Brown Eyed Girl" by Van Morrison. Berns however missed recording rhythm and blues and soon formed an offshoot label, Shout, and quickly had a hit with Freddie Scott, "Are You Lonely For Me."

Somewhere around the time BANG was formed, Berns met in a chance encounter Thomas "Tommy Ryan" Eboli, who was a Caporegime in the Genovese family and they became good friends. As BANG and Shout became more and more successful, Wexler became less and less pleased and finally told Berns he either had to leave or buy everyone out for

\$300,000. Berns found the money and bought the company. But as Morrison, engineer Brooks Arthur and others in the movie point out, when you went to the BANG office, there were all kinds of people hanging out who had nothing to do with music. Disputes with artists became increasingly common. When Neil Diamond tried to leave the label after a dispute over which single to release, he found out it wasn't done without serious repercussions. In other interviews Morrison has mentioned hiding out from the mob, and for anyone who read those interviews and wondered, what's he talking about, it wasn't bullshit.

In one of the more moving parts of the film, Morrison talks about calling up Berns, and Berns asking what he was doing and Morrison said, "Working on new songs," to which Berns responded, "That's what I'd like to do. I'd like to write songs."

One of the last songs Bern wrote which was completed by Jerry Ragovoy was "Piece of My Heart," a hit for Erma Franklin. Not long after, one afternoon, Berns told his wife he wasn't feeling well. He went to sleep and died of a heart attack. He was 38.

BANG! The Bert Berns Story will be shown at the following film festivals:

Orlando Film Festival (Oct. 22 8:15pm)
San Diego Jewish Film Festival (SPECIAL SCREENING) (Oct. 27th)
Denver Film Festival (Nov. 10 @ 4pm, Nov. 12 @ 9pm)
Sound Unseen (Minneapolis) (Nov. 15, 7pm The Trylon Microcinema)
St. Louis International Film Festival (Nov. 12 @ 6pm)
DOC 'N' Roll Film Festival (London) London/UK Premiere (Nov. 6)
DOC NYC Film Festival (Nov. 11)
Gold Coast International Film Festival (Long Island) (Nov. 12)
Hamptons Take 2 Documentary Film Festival (Dec. TBA)

